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**At Teatro Lirico: There's a Reason This Early 20th-Century Opera Is Obscure**

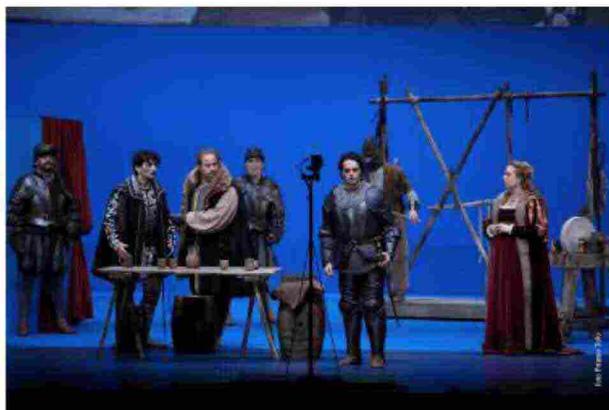
February 6, 2020 | By [James Imam](#), *Musical America*

MILAN--From Leoncavallo's *I Medici* to Giordano's *La cena delle beffe*, the grisly world of Renaissance Italy was repeatedly explored by verismo and late-verismo composers. Perhaps the brutality associated with the period sat well with a musical language geared to expressing violent emotional extremes. Alas, many such works have faded into obscurity—though few as completely as Gino Marinuzzi's *Palla de' Mozzi*. No audio or video recordings currently exist, and, before being disinterred last week by Cagliari's Teatro Lirico, the opera hadn't been performed for 78 years.

On the basis of this performance (seen 31 January), it is not difficult to see why. By frequently performing neglected titles, the Lirico has ensured a steady flow of opera aficionados to the remote Sardinian capital, and *Palla* looked promising, with *The New York Times* [review](#) of the 1932 La Scala premiere praising its "unity of style, dramatic continuity, rhythmic vigor, flowing melody, incisive declamation, vibrant humanity, ascending communicative power, fetching finales -- all excellent ingredients in the recipe for success."

That assessment is generous.

Two conventional explanations account for the obscurity of Marinuzzi's work today. First, he along with other composers working in Fascist Italy (La Scala requested *Palla*'s original title, *Le Bande Nere*, be changed because it recalled the Blackshirts) was swept under the carpet following the war. Second, Marinuzzi enjoyed towering fame as a conductor—*Musical America* proclaimed him "A real master" and a "Man of Remarkable Musical Gifts" in 1917 and 1920 respectively, while critic Paolo Isotta defines his recording of *La forza del destino* with the Orchestra dell'EIAR as the most important in history. His podium popularity eclipsed the fruits of his other vocation.



A scene from Gino Marinuzzi's *Palla de' Mozzi* at Teatro Lirico di Cagliari

The main reason for *Palla*'s obscurity is the score's lack of dramatic intensity. Giovacchino Forzano's libretto contains the requisite intrigue: Montelabro's castle is sieged by Palla de' Mozzi, leader of the mercenary Black Band, who gains entry and entrusts Anna Bianca, Montelabro's daughter, to his son, the tender Signorello. Anna Bianca falls for Signorello, who releases Montelbaro, earning himself a death sentence from Palla. To preserve what little dignity remains, Palla kills himself instead, before Signorello pledges to free all Italian people.

The score combines the glittering rhapsodies of Strauss with kitschy Korngold-ian schmaltz, all in support of full-throated, verismo-style declamations. Historical instruments including the lute, mandocello, and tambourine evoke airy medieval pastiche after Respighi, while war is depicted with incendiary admixtures of robust brass, pummeling percussion, and rattling snare. Conductor Giuseppe Grazioli, an expert in 20th-century Italian scores who has recorded Marinuzzi's orchestral works, accentuated the opera's symphonic qualities with enthusiastic orchestral playing.

But the score lacks the killer dramatic punch of Puccini. Rather than leitmotifs, assures a program note, Marinuzzi weaves a dense web of unifying themes. That was news to me: to these ears, it sounded more like an aimless journey through unrelated styles, devoid of tension, coherence, and shape. Key scenes, like Signorello's death sentence, felt interminable, while the occasionally amateur-dramatics of the libretto made for chuckle-stifling moments.



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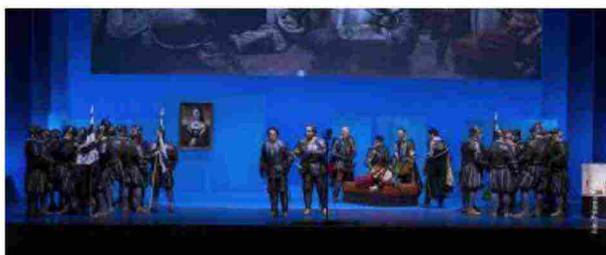
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Leonardo Caimi as Signorello, Elia Fabbian as Palla

Directors Giorgio Barberio Corsetti and Pierrick Sorin employ Chroma Key technology throughout, taping the singers and projecting the results above medieval-style backdrops. Random stills do not compensate for a lack of stagecraft: Showing a man with a shattered leg, probably Giovanni de' Medici, historical founder of the Band, is one half of an idea that is never developed; a Buster Keaton-style buffoon, stealing food or comically limbering up in advance of the execution, is maddening; assorted other images, for example of swords shown flying through the air, indicate a complete lack of inspiration.

#### A few good points

The singing bettered the staging: Elia Fabbian is no full-throttle baritone but he displayed a vigorous stage presence to carry off the loutish Palla. The role of Signorello cries out for a muscular tenor, yet Leonardo Caimi's plush, honeyed tone so effectively captured the character's sensitivity and humanity it hardly mattered. Less memorable were the Bishop (Cristian Saitta), Montelabro (Francesco Verna), and two nuns (Elena Schirru and Lara Rotili). The four mincing captains who compete for Anna Maria (Murat Can Güvem, Matteo Loi, Andrea Galli and Giuseppe Raimondo) were adequate, but far from intimidating.

Bergamasca soprano Francesca Tiburzi was the standout as Anna Maria. Her voice has depth, brilliance, and power, with the robust lower range and freely focused top knitted into a shapely whole. Tiburzi even turned an unedifying seduction scene that was hampered by the saccharine sentimentality of a silent film into a compelling character portrait—no mean feat. This performance is unlikely to bring *Palla* back from the dead. A worthwhile attempt nevertheless.

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